

Destination Knox County, Nebraska: Tourism Planning and Strategic Placemaking

A USDA Rural Development—Rural Placemaking Innovation Challenge Project
September 2022–September 2024



Final Report

The Premise

In the summer of 2022, Nebraska Extension’s Rural Prosperity Nebraska team, in partnership with Knox County Economic Development, applied for and was subsequently awarded the USDA Rural Placemaking Innovation Challenge grant. This collaboration launched the **Destination Knox County, Nebraska** project—a strategic initiative aimed at enhancing regional tourism and community development through a comprehensive approach to placemaking.

The project focuses on crafting an in-depth inventory of essential infrastructures, including tourism assets, broadband accessibility, physical structures, and recreational spaces across Knox County and the surrounding region. By analyzing socioeconomic factors and fostering partnerships with local and regional stakeholders, the initiative seeks to establish a cohesive regional tourism approach rooted in data-driven insights and community collaboration.

To achieve this, the project incorporates a multifaceted strategy:

Community-Centered Technical Assistance: Tailored support to empower communities in identifying and leveraging their unique assets.

Placemaking Strategy and Marketing Frameworks: A robust plan that combines placemaking initiatives with actionable tourism marketing tactics, underpinned by capacity building and identification of funding opportunities.

Crucially, the project respects and integrates the diverse perspectives, histories, and cultures of local tribal communities, ensuring inclusivity and cultural preservation.

Through this innovative approach, the Destination Knox County, Nebraska project aspires to position the area as a vibrant, interconnected tourism destination, fostering economic growth and enhancing the quality of life for residents.

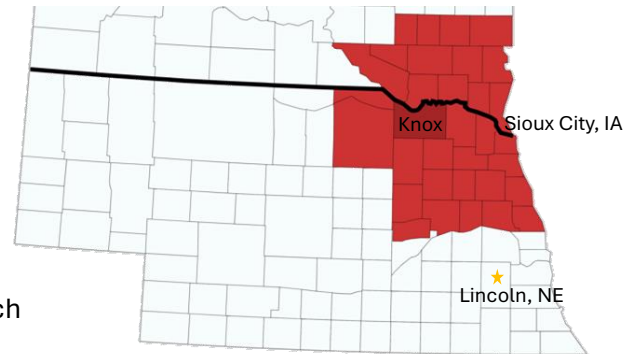
The Place

Knox County, Nebraska, the epicenter of the USDA funded Destination Knox County project, is nestled in the northeast corner of the Nebraska. Economically driven by agriculture and emerging tourism and recreation efforts, the residents of the county call the countryside, eleven towns and villages and two Native American communities home.

The Missouri and Niobrara Rivers, normally the assets which attract visitors to the region, brought catastrophic flooding and ice jams to the area in the spring of 2019.

Flood waters and ice destroyed homes and businesses, and infrastructure, roads, and bridges, upending lives and businesses across the county. As waters receded and plans for recovery emerged in late 2019, Knox County leaned into its longstanding partnership with Nebraska Extension and local development organizations to collaborate in recovery and resilient redevelopment efforts, with funding support from USDA. Yet as these efforts emerged so did the COVID-19 pandemic, shuttering the county again in 2020, pivoting the focus from tourism development and community capacity building to maintaining and supporting existing businesses.

Despite these setbacks, Knox County remains persistent in its aspiration to grow as a regional recreation and tourism destination and has fostered strong relationships with the University of Nebraska-Lincoln (UNL) and Nebraska Extension to support this work. Destination Knox County is a manifestation of that persistence, with a commitment to honoring the region's rich history and culture, including that of the Ponca and Santee Sioux Tribes and acknowledgement of climate's impact on the environment and economics of the region.



Proposed Destination Knox County project area, including counties, communities and tribal lands in Nebraska and South Dakota.

The Project

Year One Goals: *Inventory/asset mapping of tourism assets and infrastructure and building regional engagement.*

Year One Outputs: Tourism strategy development. Identify opportunities within the region, identify assets/destinations and supporting infrastructure, GIS mapping, develop criteria and materials for innovation seed grants, create detailed narrative about opportunities in the region, development of a regional tourism committee, and create a broader regional placemaking plan.

Year Two Goals: *County and community level tourism strategy; regional placemaking plan.*

Year Two Outputs: Narrative about each community and how it both stands alone and fits into the regional strategy, each community has defined goals and a shared vision, each community knows what programmatic areas to focus on, all communities are trained for placemaking implementation, and communities have identified USDA grants to target.

The project achieved significant milestones through a well-structured and adaptive approach, laying the foundation for sustainable regional tourism and placemaking. Early efforts focused on relationship-building with regional partners, identifying 30 prospective members for a Regional Tourism Committee. Tourism and placemaking categories were established, and initial data for a regional inventory was gathered, supporting the creation of maps to visualize regional assets. Despite early delays due to funding distribution, the project expedited data resource identification and mapping tasks, enabling it to get back on track quickly.

Comprehensive inventories and evaluations of tourism assets, physical structures, and recreation areas were developed and visualized through Geographic Information Systems (GIS). These maps highlighted natural features, cultural heritage sites, and hospitality zones, serving as essential tools for planning and engagement. Preliminary assessments of regional tourist demographics and socioeconomics complemented these efforts, offering a clear picture of the area's strengths and opportunities. Regional meetings with stakeholders from diverse sectors—such as tourism representatives, state parks, and local businesses—fostered collaboration and shaped the mission and vision of the initiative.

Community engagement was a central focus, with regional meetings and workshops providing platforms for discussions about tourism themes, challenges, and opportunities. Over 50 community members and stakeholders participated in facilitated sessions that identified key tourism themes, including cultural heritage, agritourism, and recreation. These insights were incorporated into comprehensive resources like a regional tourism booklet and thematic maps, which served as planning tools for both local and regional development.

The “First Impressions” program played a pivotal role in assessing community readiness for tourism. Professional visits were conducted across 11 communities, including tribal areas, to evaluate online presence, physical infrastructure, and visitor experiences. This program revealed strengths such as hunting and recreational tourism, cultural heritage, and unique regional attributes. Weaknesses, including inconsistent business hours and underutilized online platforms, were identified, providing actionable insights for improvement. The results of these visits formed the basis for detailed narratives and strategies, which were shared with communities through workshops and meetings.

Youth engagement initiatives added depth to the project, with young residents contributing perspectives through photography and storytelling. These efforts highlighted the importance of including diverse voices in tourism and placemaking strategies.

Community conversations built on these insights, helping residents refine their understanding of local strengths and identify opportunities for collaboration and growth. Themes such as “Wild West in the Midwest” and “The Great Outdoors” were developed into multi-day travel itineraries, promoting regional tourism.

As the project progressed, tourism guides and itineraries were created, incorporating data and feedback from community stakeholders. These resources were made accessible through digital platforms and QR codes, enhancing their usability for travelers. Workshops introduced innovative strategies such as leveraging social media and artificial intelligence for tourism promotion, equipping communities with tools to boost visibility and engagement. Visioning sessions encouraged communities to explore their unique identities and align their efforts with regional

goals, fostering a shared vision for sustainable tourism development. A grant writing workshop and tour of a neighboring community helped communities begin to move vision into action.

The project also prioritized cultural heritage preservation, particularly among Native American communities. Partnerships with the Ponca Tribe facilitated initiatives to capture oral histories and improve powwow grounds, enriching the cultural landscape of the region. These efforts complemented broader economic development goals and strengthened relationships among local, regional, and tribal partners.

Throughout its implementation, the project adapted to meet evolving community needs, maintaining steady progress toward its objectives. By connecting communities with funding opportunities and technical support, the project positioned itself as a catalyst for sustainable regional growth, ensuring long-term benefits for tourism and placemaking.

Key Outputs and Outcomes

Community Engagement and Collaboration

Objective: Strengthen relationships among regional stakeholders and partners to foster a shared vision for tourism and placemaking.

Major Accomplishments:

- Regional tourism committee meetings brought together stakeholders from various sectors, including local businesses, state parks, and tribal representatives. On average 20 regional tourism committee members participated in quarterly online or in person gatherings
- Community conversations and “First Impressions” visits provided insights into local strengths and weaknesses as perceived by visitors.
 - Sixteen professional "First Impressions" visits completed across 11 communities, including tribal areas.
- Overall, more than 150 residents and key stakeholders from across Knox County and the region participated in discussions about enhancing tourism and placemaking strategies.
- Engaged youth in tourism-related activities, leveraging their perspectives through photography.



Destination Knox County Regional Tourism Committee meeting. During these meetings regional tourism concepts were explored and collaboration opportunities emerged.

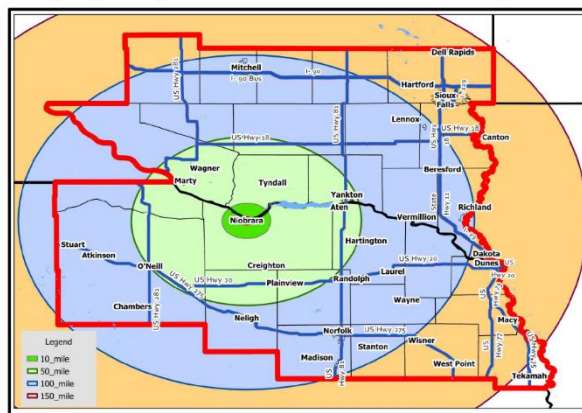
Inventory and Mapping of Regional Assets

Objective: Identify and document regional tourism assets, infrastructure, and demographic data to inform planning.

Major Accomplishments:

- GIS maps created to visualize assets such as natural attractions, broadband coverage, and recreation areas.
- Regional inventory categorized assets into themes such as cultural heritage, agritourism, and adventure tourism.
- Six tourism themes were developed to link community assets for cohesive travel itineraries.

10, 50, 100, 150 Mile Buffer of Niobrara, NE



The 10-mile buffer zone (in deep green) encompasses the central core of Niobrara, NE.

The 50-mile buffer zone (in light green) extends over the entire area of Knox County, NE, and Bon Homme County, SD, with partial coverage of Charles Mix County, SD, Yankton County, SD, Boyd County, SD, and Cedar County, NE.

The 100-mile buffer zone (in blue) covers the majority of the study region, with the exception of eastern urban clusters along the eastern boundaries of South Dakota and Nebraska.

The 150-mile buffer zone (in brown) encompasses nearly the entire study region and extends beyond its borders.

A sample radius map from “Connecting the Dots: Socioeconomic Analysis to Support Regional Tourism Planning in Knox County, NE”, one to the two inventory and mapping reports compiled for the project.

Thematic Development and Tourism Strategies

Objective: Develop and implement tourism themes to enhance regional identity and marketability.

Major Accomplishments:

- Themes like “Wild West in the Midwest” and “Culture Quest” were created to encapsulate the region’s unique offerings.
- Strategies included the use of artificial intelligence (AI) and social media to promote destinations and community events.
- Itineraries were finalized and made accessible through QR codes and online platforms.



The listing of identified tourism themes and a sample multi-day, multi-community itinerary.

Capacity Building and Education

Objective: Equip communities with knowledge and tools for tourism promotion and development.

Major Accomplishments:

- A grant funders and writing workshop was held with representatives from USDA Rural Development, the Federal Reserve and Nebraska Department of Economic Development
 - Thirty-two Knox County residents and leaders



Knox County residents engage during a Grant Funders and Writing Workshop held in Niobrara. Representatives from federal and state agencies outlined funding opportunities and community members learned how to develop grant applications.

attended, learning how to prioritize community needs and how to find and apply for grants.

- At least one grant was written and received as a result of this workshop.
- A peer-to-peer community visit was made to neighboring, Plainview, NE, helping Knox County community members learn firsthand from a community how they have addressed community tourism and development priorities—including applying for grants and using other economic development tools.
- Customer service 101 training was held, providing business owners and front-line workers an opportunity to practice customer service skills and share tourism assets.
- Training sessions provided on using social media and AI for tourism planning.
- Initial findings of the project were presented during the 2024 Community Development Society International Conference, reaching community development professionals.

Implementation and Next Steps

Key Actions:

- Community meetings identified actionable steps for promoting tourism, such as synchronizing business hours and leveraging local narratives.
- Continued capacity building efforts and community coaching will be needed to assist communities in identifying priorities, funding opportunities, leadership development, etc.
 - Nebraska Extension, with a local and regional presence, will provide support in some aspects of project continuity and implementation. Additional project and funding opportunities are sought by local and state partners.

Focus for Sustainability:

- Building community buy-in for tourism and placemaking activities.
- Strengthening connections with underrepresented groups, including tribal communities.
- Expanding regional partnerships to sustain momentum beyond the grant period.

Challenges and Unexpected Aspects of the Project

External Challenges:

- The concepts of placemaking and regionalism were at times challenging for community stakeholders to understand and to buy into—requiring additional intention and space to explore these concepts with community members.
- At times the local project team and stakeholders wanted to move into implementation and forgo planning processes which resulted in minor setbacks.
- Local broadband development and the granting of mini grants to communities was planned. However, the broadband landscape was rapidly changing at the state and local level and interest, and engagement was limited. Broadband access remains an imperative for the region, and for regional tourism development and placemaking.

Internal Challenges:

- Early in the project, members of the project team from South Dakota State University Extension stepped away from the project due to other commitments and/or changes in their employment, limiting our connections in South Dakota.
- One senior team member, who helped to craft the vision for the project, retired.
- The lead PI for the project and key local contact went on maternity leave during the first year—creating a slight pause in project momentum and management.

- Moreover, working with an interdisciplinary team takes intention and effort to build team, find common ground, and a common language.

Unexpected aspects of the project:

The power of building relationships and leveraging resources to foster collaboration and innovation emerged as unexpected aspects and impacts of the Destination Knox County project. From these emerged opportunities to work beyond the scope and term of the grant:

- **Partnerships with the Ponca Tribe:** Collaborations with UNL faculty outside of the project resulted in efforts to update powwow grounds and capture oral histories of Tribal elders and strengthen cultural and historical tourism.
- **Relationships lead to climate resiliency framework:** Building upon the relationship built with the community of Niobrara through this project, Nebraska Extension and UNL faculty have begun to explore opportunities for enhance rural climate resiliency while preserving local tourism assets, under a grant from the National Science Foundation.
- **Immersive Rural Fellows Program:** Two graduate students from UNL's Rural Fellows program worked in Knox County, contributing to diverse projects such as developing a golf passport, revamping adventure tourism maps, forming a county arts council, and conducting economic development analyses. These initiatives align with ongoing placemaking and economic development efforts.

Advice to Future Grantees

Strengths of the Program:

Community Engagement:

- Effective use of community meetings and stakeholder conversations to identify themes, opportunities, and challenges.
- Involving local residents and organizations built a sense of ownership and relevance.

Data-Driven Approach:

- Compilation of GIS data and inventories of physical, cultural, and economic assets allowed for precise mapping and analysis.
- Integration of demographic and socioeconomic data provided a comprehensive view of regional needs and opportunities.

Innovative Collaboration:

- Partnerships with local entities, including tribal communities, enhanced on-the-ground impact.
- Engagement with diverse sectors, including state parks, businesses, and tribal entities, created multidimensional perspectives.

Focus on Education and Training:

- Community-based workshops on tourism marketing, use of AI for storytelling, and grant writing equipped stakeholders with modern tools and strategies.

Theme-Based Tourism Development:

- The development of tourism themes (e.g., "Wild West in the Midwest") linked regional attractions and provided a clear identity for marketing.

Limitations of the Program:

Varied Community Interest:

- Not all communities were equally engaged in or interested in tourism development or working at a regional level, limiting the reach and impact in certain areas.

Broadband Prioritization:

- Despite its importance, broadband development did not gain sufficient traction within participating communities.

Innovative Approaches for Replication:

"First Impressions" Program:

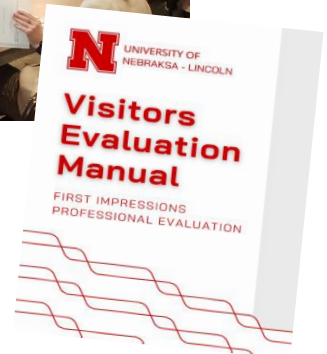
Description: This program assessed communities from the perspective of first-time visitors, evaluating online presence, signage, downtown areas, and overall impressions.

Impact: It provided actionable insights to improve local infrastructure, marketing, and service offerings.

Replication Tips: Tailor evaluations to include specific regional priorities and present findings with actionable recommendations.



Results and recommendations from First Impressions visitors are shared with residents of Creighton, Nebraska. Marketing strategies and opportunities to leverage AI technologies were shared and next steps identified.



Thematic Tourism Development:

Description: Creation of multi-day, multi-community itineraries based on identified themes like agritourism, cultural heritage, and recreation.

Impact: Enhanced regional identity and appeal by linking attractions into cohesive packages.

Replication Tips: Use local strengths and resources to define themes and test these through community consultations.

Integration of Technology:

Description: Leveraging AI for marketing, storytelling, and social media strategies to promote tourism.

Impact: Empowered communities to use advanced tools to enhance visibility and attract visitors.

Replication Tips: Provide training sessions and templates to make technology accessible to smaller or less tech-savvy communities.

Collaborative Planning with Local Fellows:

Description: Involvement of university students (Rural Fellows) for immersive on-the-ground work, such as mapping and event planning.

Impact: Bridged academic knowledge with community needs, fostering innovative solutions.

Replication Tips: Partner with academic institutions to identify skilled students for summer or short-term engagement.

Recommendations for Future Projects:

Proactive Planning:

- Prioritize early communication and engagement with stakeholders.

Tailored Community Engagement:

- Conduct initial surveys to gauge interest and tailor efforts to each community's goals and readiness.

Strengthen Partnerships:

- Define roles and maintain regular interactions with key collaborators, including RD staff and external consultants.

Focus on Sustained Impact:

- Develop strategies for long-term engagement and funding, including recurring grants and self-sustaining initiatives.

What would you have done differently?

As noted in the challenges above, there are a couple of opportunities which might have been taken to improve the Destination Knox County, Nebraska regional tourism project.

- Chief among these opportunities was the necessity to render the concepts of regionalism and placemaking more comprehensible to the local project team, along with clearly defining the anticipated project deliverables and outcomes. A significant portion of time was devoted to educating and reeducating the local team and community members regarding the potential of this initiative and the critical importance of planning and collaboration. Greater focus during the grant writing phase on ensuring a thorough understanding and consensus on these concepts and deliverables, coupled with an exploration of more effective methods for engaging community members in project development, would have yielded substantial benefits.
- While staff transitions and leaves were unavoidable, proactive efforts to clarify team roles, individual expectations, and timelines could have enhanced the agility and responsiveness of the internal team amidst such changes. Furthermore, team meetings could have gone beyond activity check-ins and status updates to include deliberate efforts to foster alignment and understanding within the interdisciplinary team. This approach would likely have provided greater clarity and focus, while also contributing to a well-defined and accessible vision for the project that could be effectively communicated to both the local team and broader stakeholders.

Conclusion

Destination Knox County, Nebraska's comprehensive approach—integrating data-driven analysis, community input, and thematic development—has positioned the region as a promising destination for tourism and economic growth. By addressing challenges and fostering collaboration, the initiative lays the groundwork for sustainable development and continued regional identity building and placemaking.

For more information about the**USDA-Rural Development RPIC Destination Knox County, Nebraska project, please contact:**

Jordan Rasmussen

Rural Prosperity Nebraska Extension Educator, Program Area Leader

Nebraska Extension

jordan.rasmussen@unl.edu